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SUMMER CAMP CAMPAIGN

A break from life in transitional housing

Brother and sister will get to ride in boats, make new friends and tell ghost stories.

By AMY KAUFMAN
Times Staff Writer

When Celeste Torres was a little girl, her eyes would widen simply at the thought of a coveted, remote-controlled pink Barbie dream car.

"She wanted it so bad, but I just couldn't afford it," says Angel Miller, Celeste's mother. As Celeste's begging for the toy became incessant, Miller decided to teach her daughter a lesson about the value of money.

"We headed down to skid row, and I made her hand out Egg

McMuffins to the homeless," recalls Miller. "She hasn't asked me for anything since."

In fact, there's been a role reversal: Miller says Celeste is now the one constantly reminding her mom to stay on budget at the supermarket or the Payless shoe store, where the 10-year-old recently insisted she wanted a plain \$7 pair of Airwalk shoes over the fancier \$27 version.

"I bought her the \$27 ones," says Miller, who works in an orthopedic surgeon's office. "She got so mad at me. But my kids are my rock. I had to."

Indeed, the bond among Miller, Celeste and her 7-year-old brother, Raul — a.k.a. "Pooty" — is palpable as they sit close to one another at the Obershaw House, a transitional housing program, where the family has

been living since November. Just last year, the family grew closer when Miller's boyfriend of four years threw the clan out on the street immediately after Miller had supplied the down payment for his house. As a result, both kids are nervous about leaving Miller in a few weeks for their first trip to Camp Nawakwa.

"It's not peaches and cream," Miller says of the current situation. "And that's why I want them to experience the camp I've seen on TV, where they get to go in a boat or kiss a boy under a tree."

"I want to go and meet new kids," Pooty says eagerly. "It looks like it's gonna be fun. There will be tepees and bows and arrows. Oh, ghost stories too!"

Thanks to Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino

County, Pooty and Celeste will be sent to Camp Nawakwa, a program in Barton Flats. They'll be able to swim in a heated pool, explore nature trails and dress up in pirate costumes at camp, where they'll spend a week with about 120 other kids ages 7 to 16.

"At camp, kids learn how to be self-reliant because they're away from their parents," says Letty Hernandez, co-director of Camp Nawakwa. "It's like a little community up here. Kids serve each other at dinner. When they canoe, they have to row at the same time. On the wall climb, they have to trust the kids below to hold them up so they won't fall."

Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County is one of 60 organizations receiving financial support this year through the Los Angeles Times

Summer Camp Campaign. More than 8,000 underprivileged children will go to camp this summer, thanks to \$1.5 million raised last year.

The annual fundraising campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which this year will match the first \$1.1 million in contributions at 50 cents on the dollar.

Donations are tax-deductible. For more information, call (213) 237-5771. To make donations by credit card, go to latimes.com/summercamp. To send checks, use the attached coupon. Do not send cash. Unless requested otherwise, gifts of \$50 or more will be acknowledged in The Times.

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